The Jackson Whites

By HENRY COCHENOWER.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN was illuminated brilliantly. The last rehearsal before the spring opening of the circus was drawing to a close. The tattooed lady had just shown some reporters, as a special mark of favor, a three color picture of the Lord's Supper not ordinarily exposed to view. The Australian bushman, his boomerang under his naked arm, was chuckling over a nelspaper comic section. It was then I overheard tse Circassian beauty declare that she was going home to stay at the end of her season.

"Won't she be safer and happier here in America than over there among all those wild Kurdish brigands and Armenian atrocities?" I asked the press agent.

"Listen," admonished that gentleman," she's not an imported freak. She didn't come from Circassia any more than Circassian walnut furniture comes from there. She's a Jackson White Albino from over in the Ramapo Mountains. Jackson Whites are an interbred lot of Indians, negroes and whites. When she says home she means a mountain slum about ten miles back in the mountains behind West Point. You couldn't drive her back there with a club. She just wants a raise."

That was my first contact with a Jackson White. The next time——

Two of us were tramping through the Ramapos. We were searching, for want of something better to do, for traces of the Cannonball Trail, the mountain road from Pompton and Wyanque to West Point over which in Revolutionary war days munitions for Gen. George Washington's army were freighted.

Climbing a steep, heavily wooded slope, we came upon a dark skinned man cutting chestnut firewood. His black hair was wavy, not kinky, but a slight thickening of his features betrayed negro blood, though his eyes were of a contradictory blue.

"Hello, there," we called out.

The woodcutter swung his ax three times before he replied. Then he said:

"Yowdy." He resumed his chopping.

"Have you any idea where the Cannonball Trail ran through these mountains?"

"I never seed it. I never yeard tell of it."

He was about to swing his ax again when the offer of a cigar halted him. He stuck it behind his ear as a grocer's clerk does a pencil, and leaned his ax against a log.

"Uncle John might tell you something about it. He knows everything they is to know about these mountains and the mountain people. I live down back of Hillburn now. Sometimes I work in the Hillburn foundry. If you wants to talk to Uncle John, folley this trail a spell. Then branch to the left fork till you gits Green Nose Mountain behind you. Then take a little trail to the right—just a foot path it is—and after a mile or mebbe three miles you'll come to Uncle John's place."

The bald rock face of Green Nose Mountain was unmistakable. My companion declared—and he has a naturalist's knowledge of these things—that it was a rattler den. But we had trouble following the foot path, which faded out from time to time. It wound through a scrubby woods that flourished despite the thickly strewn glacial bowlders that were in turn covered by dead leaves, fallen trees and branches. The exposed rock surfaces were mottled with scaly lichens. Every step was a speculation with the rattlesnakes that certainly were concealed there. Presently we came out into a clearing that covered all of a small mesa. There was a log cabin and two or three tumbledown outhouses.

Dog Catches a Fox.

Dogs began to bark and bay. A man came out of the cabin and cussed them into silence. His moustache was a ragged fringe; his beard a greasy tassel. He wore no coat and his spotted vest was ornamented at the lapel with a brassy safety pin, a reserve against the fall of the last of its buttons. His trousers were patched in half a dozen places. Bits of white string served him as shoe laces, and his hat was a misshapen felt. But the double barreled shotgun in his hands, though old, was a gem of a weapon.

"Hello," he said, and gave us a toothless grin of welcome.

This mountaineer admitted he was Uncle John. We identified ourselves to his satisfaction and explained that that we were looking for the Cannonball Trail.

"Trail's furder over, I think, beyond the ridge. See 'at brindle bitch? She killed a fox yesterday."

Beaming with pride, he indicated a lean hound that tugged at her chain and bayed lugubriously because she was not allowed to join the other dogs that circled about us, hopeful of a chance to nip our legs.

"My 'ooman said a fox had been agitten the chickens. She said he'd et eleven broilers. I told her: 'When you see him turn 'at fast dog loose.' Not long after I'd gone yesterday mornen that fox put on his bold shoes—he knew I had the gun with me—and come right close to the

The baby in the picture is an Albino. Indian and negro blood runs through the veins of the young man.

housen (that plural form for house is an heirloom from some Hessian ancestor) and then the 'ooman let old Belle loose. She got the fox in about six jumps. He bit her yere and there but not much. Fox's hide no good now. Fur's too loose. I just buried him. Somethen else is ataken the broilers, but I guess it must be snakes."

Uncle John shivered. Rattlers and copperheads are the bane of the poorly shod Jackson Whites' existence.

We tried to pump him about the mountain people, but on that subject he was entirely uncommunicative. We could see an old woman peering through the crack of the open door of the cabin, but she did not come out. When we invited her out to have her picture taken, she slammed the door. We moved on, following a narrow pathway, and after a while came to a corduroy trail—Green Mountain road—that wound through a swamp, Bear Swamp the natives call it. This led us eventually to a settlement of these strange people. Here were half a dozen "housen," log cabins and patched up affairs of milled board, bits of tin and tar paper.

Dogs rushed at us with bared fangs from every house, but their owners appeared in time to prevent them from carrying out their snarling threats to devour us. There was one old man, three younger ones, several young women and some small children. There were representatives there, we learned, of the DeGroot, Mann and Call families. All were related. One of the youngsters was an albino, shielding her watery eyes from the sun with a ragged elbow.

Just how they were paired off we did not learn, but they lived in the most primitive fashion. Water was "fetched" from a nearby spring. They were seemingly undisturbed by sewage problems, birth control, or the cost of living. A woodchuck, blood dripping from his snout, hung by the tail from a nail driven in the eaves of the best of the cabins. The uneven projections of the mortised ends of the logs served as hooks for odds and ends of rusty steel traps, ragged undergarments and red peppers.

"The dogs had just killed that woodchuck," volunteered one of the girls, whose straight black hair hung unbound on her shoulders. Her uncorseted figure moved with a savage grace, for which she was indebted to some Algonquin ancestor. Her name, she said, was Serena. Young woodchucks, she explained, were possessed of a flavor akin to chicken. This, however, was not a young woodchuck, but she said he was to be roasted for dinner along with green corn.

The Name Anathema.

There was a small, irregular patch of corn all but smothered in weeds on the slope in the rear of these cabins. Beside Serena's cabin was a barrel turned on its side. It was the domicile of the best of the mongrel dogs. The rest of the pack lived in burrows under the cabins.

The old man with snowy hair and light blue eyes was nevertheless partly indebted for existence to some negro forbears. Serena suggested that he show us his new house. It was a two room cubicle partially waterproofed with odds and ends of tar paper and tin. The entire structure would have rattled around on the inside of a Fifth avenue bus. He lived there with his daughter and orphan grandchild. He had built it, he said, because the one room cabin with its loft had become too crowded. It was the first change of residence he had ever made.

Beside it was a dugout, a cavern in the hillside, with a facade of logs and boards and eaves of sod. It was a barn, they said, but there was nothing in it.

We tried to talk to them about their ancestry, about the beginnings of the Jackson Whites, though we were not so untactful as to employ this term, which is highly objectionable in the ears of the mountain dwellers. Even so the topic made them sullen and uncommunicative. They made us feel their displeasure by disappearing into their "housen" and closing the doors. We accepted this hint and crossed over the backbone of Hope Mountain. At its base we came to a shabby old farmhouse which, despite its unpainted shiplap was a palace as compared with the cabins on Green Mountain road.

It was the home of George Suffern, a Jackson White of 87, who has the respect of his wealthy and fashionable neighbors of the Ramapo Valley. He was farming a bit of land belonging to one of the valley families and had none of the shyness of his kinsmen back in the mountains. He had been living there for forty-eight years, he said. One of his sons, a gold toothed young man with a great sweep of wavy black hair, and the son's wife, also black haired, lived with him. The couple's child, a two-year-old boy, was an albino, who squinted stupidly in the sunshine, but romped happily with his small dog Gyp in the dark of the shaded kitchen.

Old George (brown eyed) was cheery this day in the company of his visiting brother Bill, a genial blue eyed gaffer, whose face above the white beard was mottled with cancer scars. Bill was proud to inform us that he was one of Company I, Forty-fifth Pennsylvania Regiment in the civil war and had enlisted at Bloomingdale, N. J. With a bit of blarney George was persuaded to talk about the mountain folks. Where did they come from?

"Lots of 'em was runaway black men, slaves. Some Injuns and some white men who had to leave the cities."

"Where did they get their women?"

"Well, some of 'em got Irish and some Injun and some black girls. All that was long time ago. Old people told me. I was born in these mountains and old people had lived here all their lives before. I was born. I don't know much about it. Old people told me how to fix a bark bound tree, though. On the 20th or 21st of June cut it all around and the tree won't die. Don't ever bark a tree on any other day or you'll kill it."

Plainly the history of the Jackson Whites is not to be revealed to the casual visitor. Only a few persons have had the patience and sympathetic understanding to live in contact with this tricolored breed and help and study them. Miss Mack is known and loved by all those Jackson Whites in the mountains near Suffern, N. Y. She conducts a school and settlement on the summit of the Houvenkopf. F. G. Speck, an anthropologist, spent several years in contact with them. A collection of baskets and wooden ware, handicraft of the Jackson Whites was made by him for the American Museum and is on exhibition there.

Two Haunting Dreads.

It is pretty generally agreed that there are about 1,500 of these people, and that by the tests of psychiatry their average mental age is low. Their only social organization is that of prehistoric man—the cooking fire circle. They have two haunting dreads, representatives of the law and rattlesnakes.

They are cunning distillers, but their illegal cure for snakebite only serves to attract to them unwelcome attention from the New York State troopers. Perhaps it is this complex situation that causes the Jackson Whites to increase in primitive discomfort, unmindful of the lure of a civilization advertised by the reflection of New York's lights against the blue black skies of their long nights.

Since before the Revolutionary war this consanguineous breed has lived there in Rockland and Orange counties, New York, the mixture of red, black and whites, growing more involved with each generation. The Indians, who contributed their blood to the founding of this odd race, were Algonquins. The negroes were runaway slaves. The whites were freedmen from the Dutch colonial plantations, Hessians, A. W. O. L. from King George's army—let it be whispered—skulkers from the Continental army.

On the parade ground of the United States Military Academy at West Point there can be seen to-day massive links from a chain that Gen. Washington caused to be stretched across the Hudson to bar the passage of British ships. That chain was forged in the Wynaque Valley from iron mined in these very same Ramapos and it was of the implements of war carted over the Cannonball Trail to West Point.

Grain was spilled, no doubt, from some of the carts that lumbered through that wilderness, and this seed sprouted. In much the same fashion, probably, was the seed of white men left there. There were men who grew weary of the scant rations and the paydays that never came in the Continental army. Some of these went home to their families. But others without families, and therefore with less excuse, hid themselves among the negroes and Indians of the mountains. There they found food and liquor and women, all of which had been scarce around the cantonments of Gen. Washington's army.

The mutiny of Pennsylvania line troops in 1781 was followed by a mutiny of a portion of the New Jersey line troops cantoned at Pompton. If ever soldiers had excuse those poor devils did. But it was an infection that had to be stamped out, and Mad Anthony Wayne was sent to accomplish this. He court-martialed three ringleaders, and the sentence for two of them was execution by a firing squad of their fellows. A third was pardoned.

The shots that ended the lives of those two echoed against the nearby slopes of the Ramapos and it was a thunderous warning to deserters to stay doggo. And so it was the Jackson Whites got some of their white ancestors.

Close though it is to the greatest settlement of humanity in all the world this region nearly a century and a half after the Revolutionary war remains sufficiently wild to harbor a few bears and deer and many species of smaller game.

It is a human backwater, a reservoir of seemingly colonial customs almost as conveniently placed for the inspection of New Yorkers as the Aquarium or the Bronx Zoo. And yet the isolation of these people has been nearly as complete as that of the Southern highlanders of the Appalachians. In a literary sense it has been more complete, for the pure white mountaineers are more satisfactory characters in a book or a short story or a play than the hybrids of the Ramapos.

Ethnically there is every difference between those millions who dwell in the mountains to the south and these folks who dwell within range of the guns of West Point. In customs, habits of speech, diet, superstitions, social organization and thought they are blood brothers.

The Jackson Whites have fashionable neighbors such as those of the Tuxedo Park colony and the estates in the Ramapo and Wynaque Valleys. But these folks, though they may fret about the degradation of the mountaineers of North Carolina and contribute to missions to

Serena of Algonquin ancestry.

convert those faraway folks, are strangely calloused concerning the situation of these wretched neighbors. Miss Mack's settlement and a few others are totally inadequate for the needs of all the Jackson Whites.

A few of them have left the mountains for short periods to work in factories or in kitchens but rarely do they stay long away from their beloved mountains. That is why I think the circus press agent was wrong. I believe there will be another Circassian beauty on the freak platform of the circus this year. I am prepared to bet that the Jackson White albiness has gone back to her red, white and black relations in the Ramapos.